

HOUSE BILL REPORT

SHB 3144

As Passed Legislature

Title: An act relating to improving outreach to consumers through creation of a consumer protection web site and information line.

Brief Description: Creating a consumer protection web site.

Sponsors: By House Committee on Technology, Energy & Communications (originally sponsored by Representatives Lias, Loomis, Hunt, Miloscia, Rolfes, Upthegrove, Linville, Green, VanDeWege, Morrell, Conway, Kelley, Nelson, Santos and Ormsby).

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Technology, Energy & Communications: 1/30/08 [DPS].

Floor Activity:

Passed House: 2/4/08, 94-0.

Senate Amended.

Passed Senate: 3/7/08, 49-0.

House Concurred.

Passed House: 3/10/08, 94-0.

Passed Legislature.

Brief Summary of Substitute Bill

- Requires the Department of Information Services to develop a consumer protection web site.
- Requires the Attorney General's Office to review Consumer Protection Act complaints and report to the Legislature by December 1, 2008.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON TECHNOLOGY, ENERGY & COMMUNICATIONS

Majority Report: The substitute bill be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do pass. Signed by 12 members: Representatives McCoy, Chair; Eddy, Vice Chair; Crouse, Ranking Minority Member; McCune, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Ericksen, Hankins, Herrera, Hudgins, Hurst, Kelley, Morris and Van De Wege.

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not a part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

Staff: Kara Durbin (786-7133).

Background:

Office of Regulatory Assistance: The Washington Office of Regulatory Assistance (ORA) was created in the Office of Financial Management in 2003 as an expansion of the Office of Permit Assistance. The ORA helps answer permitting questions and provides access to information about state regulations. In addition, the ORA assists with coordinating between the layers of state, local, and federal permit review.

The ORA has two primary ways it delivers its services: a regulatory help desk assisting approximately 2,000 callers per year; and case managers located in regional offices who facilitate, coordinate, and help resolve disputes that can arise in permitting. The ORA acts as an informal coordinating agency for the permitting processes at the Department of Ecology, the Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Department of Natural Resources, and the Department of Health. The ORA also maintains an extensive web site, which includes permitting information and a link to the Business Portal: <http://www.ora.wa.gov/>.

Business Portal: In January of 2006 several state agencies, and a representative for local jurisdictions, signed a Project Charter, which created a process to develop and implement a one-stop business portal for Washington citizens and businesses called the Business Portal. In February of 2006 the Governor in Executive Order 06-02 directed all regulatory, taxing, and permitting agencies to improve and simplify service to Washington citizens. Part of that directive was to develop the Business Portal as a single, secure online portal to make licensing, permitting, regulatory approvals or filings, and tax collections easier for businesses.

Approximately 22 state and local government agencies were involved in the development of the Business Portal. The final product was released on June 21, 2007: <http://www.business.wa.gov/>.

Attorney General's Office: The Attorney General's Office (AGO) is responsible for enforcing many of the state's consumer protection laws including the Consumer Protection Act. The Consumer Protection Division of the AGO performs several consumer protection related functions, including educating the public on issues such as identity theft; mediating complaints between consumers and businesses; and administering the state's lemon law for new motor vehicle warranty enforcement.

The AGO's web site maintains some consumer protection related information on its web site. In addition, many state agencies provide consumer protection related information on their individual web sites.

Summary of Substitute Bill:

The Department of Information Services (DIS) must coordinate among state agencies to develop a consumer protection web site, which will serve as a one-stop web site for consumer information.

At a minimum, the web site must provide information or links to information on:

- insurance information provided by the Office of the Insurance Commissioner;
- child care information provided by the Department of Early Learning;
- financial information provided by the Department of Financial Institutions;
- health care information provided by the Department of Health;
- home care information provided by the Home Care Quality Authority;
- licensing information provided by the Department of Licensing; and
- other information available on existing state agency web sites that may be helpful to consumers.

By July 1, 2008 state agencies must report to the DIS on whether they maintain resources for consumers that could be made available through the consumer protection web site.

The DIS must make the consumer protection web site available to the public by September 1, 2008.

By December 1, 2008 the DIS, in coordination with other state agencies, must develop a plan on how to build upon the consumer protection web site to create a consumer protection portal. This plan must also include an examination of the feasibility of developing a toll-free information line to support the consumer protection portal.

The AGO must conduct a study to: (1) determine the percentage of consumer complaints alleging violations of the Consumer Protection Act (CPA) that are resolved to the consumer's satisfaction; and (2) develop sanctions that the AGO may use if a CPA complaint has merit and the business fails to respond adequately to the complaint. The AGO must report its findings to the Legislature by December 1, 2008.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Requested on original bill on January 25, 2008. Fiscal note requested on substitute bill on January 30, 2008.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony:

(In support) Consumer fraud complaints are high in this state. Our consumers are vulnerable in our high-tech society. There is a lack of a central place to find these types of resources. At the federal level, these types of consumer protection related web sites have been created. This bill is a phased approach, which begins with a simple web site and a study to move towards creating a consumer protection portal. The toll-free number is also important to connect those citizens that are not adept at using the internet.

(Neutral) It is not anticipated that this bill will have a fiscal impact on the Department of Information Services, and it is likely it can be implemented within existing resources.

(Opposed) None.

Persons Testifying: (In support) Representative Liias, prime sponsor.

(Neutral) Tamara Jones, Department of Information Services.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.